



Paige Bisbee distributes supplies and snacks as part of an inclusive employment program at a law firm in Bellevue, Washington.



#### OUR DIGITAL EDITIONS

Click here for an example of inclusion at Costco (Part 1). (See page 11 for details.)

# Special needs, special jobs

Companies, and workers, benefit from inclusive employment

BY RICHARD SEVEN

WORK MATTERS. It helps put food on the table and clothes on our backs. It connects us to the evolving world. It develops and affirms our identities. Even when it feels like a slog, work engages us and shapes our potential.

When you have a disability, work can mean even more.

Bob Brookens has cerebral palsy and is quadriplegic and nonverbal. Yet he performs quality-control assurance work for Direct Interactions, a Seattle-based call center outsourcing company. With the help of assistive technology, a job coach, schedule flexibility, a caring family and a strong will, Brookens, 44, has held the job for five years.

Paige Bisbee, 23, has a severe intellectual disability and doesn't speak, but she distributes supplies and snacks to workers at the law office of Davis Wright Tremaine in Bellevue, Washington. She wears a blue apron and an ear-to-ear smile as she pushes her cart about the office. She loves work.

In fact, many more people across the country with physical and intellectual challenges are earning wages and developing potential by performing a wide range of tasks, from cleaning to food services to retail to computing. So what does "supportive employment" or "inclusive employment" do for employers?

Often, companies get workers who bring low rates of absenteeism and a high will to perform. These businesses can improve efficiency by reconfiguring workflow so better-paid and more highly trained workers can skip the simpler tasks. They also often report higher morale within the staff, goodwill from customers and improved workforce retention. In some cases, they can qualify for tax credits.

In other words, it is just good business.

#### Finding the right fit

Still, it takes work upfront to make sure a job is the right fit for all involved. In 2013, Deb Loken Zaha, office administrator for

Davis Wright Tremaine, was asked by a partner at the firm to consider hiring an applicant with a developmental disability. She agreed to the meeting, but was tentative.

"While I thought this was an interesting idea, I had some concerns," Loken Zaha acknowledges. "How can I bring in an employee with developmental disabilities without it being a distraction and affecting productivity in our office? Will our lawyers and staff embrace such a program, and what can we expect from our new employee? Will he or she enjoy the work?"

She eventually hired the applicant, who was represented by Bellevue-based AtWork! ([atworkwa.org](http://atworkwa.org)), one of several nonprofit agencies in the region that help people with physical and intellectual disabilities find, train for and succeed in jobs. After a few years on the job, the applicant "graduated" to a full-time food-services job at Microsoft.

The worker's success emboldened Loken



## RESOURCES

*These organizations offer more information on inclusive employment.*

- Association of People Supporting Employment First: [apse.org](http://apse.org)
- U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy: [dol.gov/odep](http://dol.gov/odep)
- Institute for Community Inclusion: [communityinclusion.org](http://communityinclusion.org)
- Institute on Community Integration: [ici.umn.edu](http://ici.umn.edu)
- Rehabilitation and Research Training Center: [researchondisability.org/](http://researchondisability.org/)

Zaha, a Costco member, to hire additional employees with disabilities, like Bisbee.

Supportive employment programs can be found at both large and small businesses, from warehouses to retailers to insurance offices. The work varies, as do the levels and types of disability and required accommodation.

A good example is Microsoft, based in Redmond, Washington. It has partnered with PROVAIL ([provail.org](http://provail.org)), a Seattle nonprofit that aids people with disabilities, to implement an active hiring program aimed at attracting and supporting talented people on the autism spectrum. The program includes a two-week hands-on academy that focuses on developing ability, team projects and skill assessment, while also giving candidates ways to showcase their talent. So far, 16 people have gotten high-paying jobs as software developers, data scientists and in other roles.

And the number of workers supporting the sprawling Microsoft campus has soared, too. In 2013, the company's Real Estate & Facilities (RE&F) department decided to become more focused on finding jobs for people with disabilities. Microsoft changed its model to more aggressively work with vendor partners to find opportunities. The number of supported employees who work across the Puget Sound campus in cafés, landscaping jobs and other roles rose from 28 to 200.

"Microsoft has a huge presence in the Puget Sound, and we have a responsibility to our community," says Rob Towne, director of Microsoft RE&F. "That's 200 stories—unique stories that have changed people's lives."

## The challenges ahead

All involved in supported employment say there is vast room for improvement. For example, in Microsoft's home state of Washington, while the employment rate for all working-age (18 to 64) state residents is about 76 percent, the corresponding overall rate for state residents with disabilities is about half of that. Nationally, the stats are even worse.

Experts caution against viewing people with disabilities as a monolith. Each person has his or her own abilities and circumstance.

Allison Wohl, executive director of the Association of People Supporting Employment First ([apse.org](http://apse.org)), based in Rockville, Maryland, says people with disabilities often face a number of barriers to work, including low expectations, stigma and bias, transportation issues and uneven on-the-job support. Still, she sees hope. "We are seeing a positive trend of many employers—large and small—coming to the realization that hiring workers with disabilities is not only the right thing to do, but is also good for their bottom lines," she says.

Supported employment requires cooperation. States and counties fund service providers who serve the job seekers and employers. The agencies assess the client's issues and capabilities and try to secure employment. The providers also work with companies and the worker after placement to ensure success. Some people may require one-on-one support.

Sometimes efforts don't work, but no one gives up before they try because people can surprise you. In 2011, AtWork! connected Direct Interactions with Brookens, who started working with augmented communication devices when he was 8. Now, he listens to recorded customer service calls on his MacBook Air computer, which he controls with small head switches, and assesses the skill of the call takers. His good work helped embolden Direct Interactions president Matt Storey to employ about 35 employees with disabilities nationwide.

Employers say that people with disabilities



## OUR DIGITAL EDITIONS

Click here for Part 2 of inclusion at Costco. (See page 11 for details.)

add to the diversity of their workforce, while offering each employee a social setting. Being flexible, however, is an important accommodation. "Because all our people work from home, we really don't have a culture, per se," says Storey, who was named AtWork! 2015 employer of the year, "but working at home offers important flexibility. For some of our employees just the hassle of getting to the worksite can be a lot to deal with."

Storey also allows employees to make their own hours. Brookens tires easily and often works only a couple of hours a day. Still, Direct Interactions values his work and pays him \$15 an hour.

The often-overlooked partners in supported employment are the parents, siblings and/or other loved ones. Bob Brookens not long ago treated his family to lunch. A small thing? Not to him and his father, Doug, a Costco member. Both beamed with pride before the first bite.

"I've often found myself saying, 'No, Bob would never be able to do that,'" says Doug, "only to be proven wrong. His job is much more than something to fill his days. It represents an accomplishment of which he is quite proud." **C**

*Richard Seven is a freelance writer in Seattle.*



Bob Brookens does quality-control assurance work with the help of assistive technology.

RED BOX PICTURES